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The birth of the Cretan Polis: a case of restricted social evolution. A curious lack of institutional mobility in the Iron Age Aegean

ABSTRACT

Iron Age Crete differed from the rest of Greece in that it did not contain institutions, such as that of public assembly, the gymnasium, open assembly temples, the andron, etc., which were ubiquitous outside Crete. Crete was, however, actively interacting with the rest of Greece and this situation appears not be the result of limited contact. One explanation is that Crete contained a very different type of social structure during this period. The generation and spread of several of these common institutions outside Crete was due to the strategy of aggrandizers within active contexts such as that of funerals and interstate athletic contests. Crete lacked the interstate athletic context and its funeral contexts were decidedly different from those elsewhere, with far less activity tied to the behavior of aggrandizers. This observation suggests paths for future research.

KEYWORDS: Iron Age Crete, Institutions, funerals, networking, aggrandizers, social evolution

INTRODUCTION

A hallmark of Cretan polities in the Iron Age, at least until the 3rd century BCE, was that they did not incorporate some common institutions which were seen ubiquitously in the rest of the ancient Greek world. Although differences in dissemination of the results of archaeological research hamper our view of ancient Crete in the important period of the Iron Age (but see attempt by Gaignerot-Driessen and Driessen 2014), the information we can take on aggregate shows that a Cretan polis of this period lacked important institutions such as public assembly for theatrical entertainment, the gymnasium, the house-based symposium, all of which were contained in the social structure of Greek communities in the rest of the Mediterranean (Small 2010, in press b). (Fig. 1)

The important question to ask is why this phenomenon existed, especially since Crete was very much a part of the earlier Late Bronze Age koine, which included the mainland and the Aegean islands. The issue is complex and there is no single explanation which alone serves to explain this completely. The issue I explore here is the critical structural difference between communities in Iron Age Crete and the rest of the Greek world. This structural difference impeded the development of institutions on Crete which were similar to those in other Greek settlements.
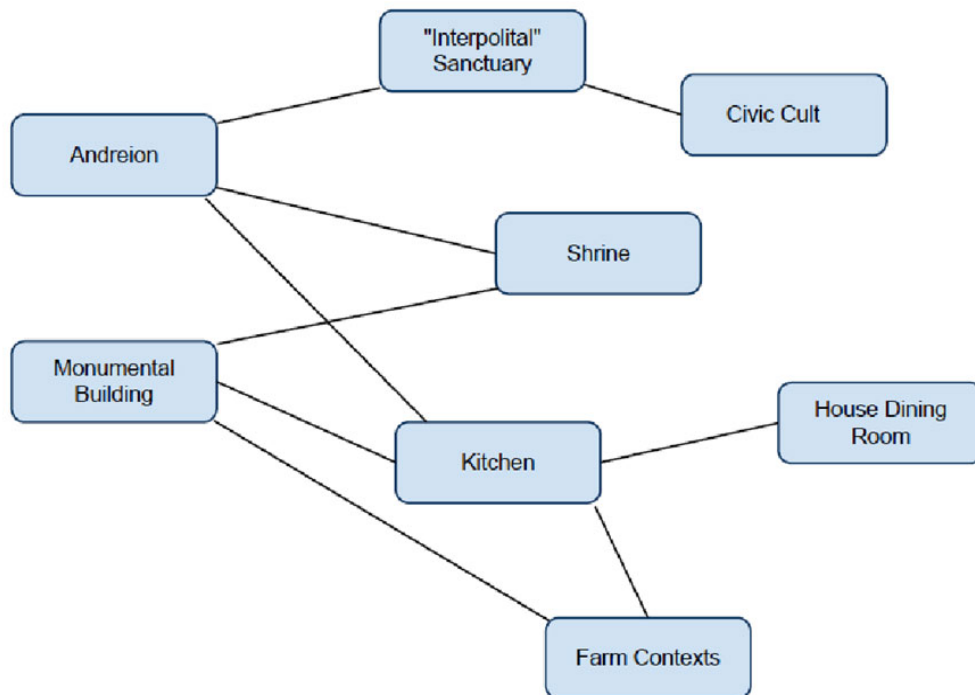
Armature of Institutions at Azoria

Fig. 1. Social Structure of Iron Age Azoria with linkage to Interstate Sanctuary, by author.

THE PICTURE OF COMMUNITIES OUTSIDE CRETE

The start of the Iron Age, or the period right after the collapse of the Late Bronze Age palaces, was one within which the Greek world enjoyed a rather stable social structure, albeit probably less complex than Greece in the Mycenaean period. But in the 8th century there was a breakdown of the social structure which held communities together (see Small in press a and in press b for deeper argument). In what must have been a chaotic period, various Greek communities were experiencing internal strife, which often resulted in community fissioning, seen as the spread of Greek communities throughout the Mediterranean and Black Seas. This strife was engendered by the infusion of new wealth and access to prestige goods by new families, who did not have the pre-established status of older and more established families in the communities. There were two possible sources for this wealth. One was the movement of people into uncultivated tracts of land, which had been abandoned after the fall of the palaces. This would have produced new wealth for families who were expanding their agricultural holds. The second is the increasing contact and exchange that Greeks were experiencing with other cultures in the Mediterranean. This new wealth and access to prestige goods, now held by people without pre-established privileged social positions, presented a significant problem to Greek communities for many

years, as seen in Hesiod's biting 8th century observation that wealth precedes status in his day (*Works and Days* 313), and Solon's 6th century attempts to give the new wealthy a position with the power structure of ancient Athens (good analysis in Osborne 1985). There was wealth, but no established position within the communities for these newly wealthy families.

A common social outcome to this internal structure problem is community fissioning, as people with new wealth seek to establish social positions in hived off communities, what we commonly refer to colonies. This situation paralleled similar social scenarios in other ancient cultures. One of the most common is the example of cycling chiefdoms among the Mississippian cultures of North America (Blitz 1999). Here factional leaders, fighting for limited community positions, often hived off with their retainers, and founded new villages (Barrier and Horsley 2014). The situation in Greece must have been similar. Historians such as Lintott (1982) have noted that the force of violence between powerful factions fighting for positions of power in Greek polities provided an impetus for the exit of rival leading factions. Bandy (2004) reconstructs a similar case for communities in the Formative (1500 – 250 B.C.E.) period of Bolivia's Titicaca Basin. In those villages there was increasing intragroup conflict. Such conflict can, as Turner earlier observed (1957), stem from competition between ambitious leaders in a community. Since the social structure of these communities could not mitigate this conflict, the villages fissioned. It was not until later in the Formative period that new institutions, here those related to public ceremonialism, rose, which could counteract fissioning, by providing a context for social integration between conflicting members of the community.

Operating within a highly interactive and mutliscalar network, these Greek communities were to self-organize into new types of communities with new institutions such as that of theater, the symposium, and the gymnasium. The communities were connected by an extremely interactive network which tied together many Greeks and produced a unique similarity between communities in their internal institutional structure.

How did these new institutions arise out of a period of social fluidity and chaos? Again, ethnographic study has demonstrated that communities in such stages of flux will emerge with new internal structures which were initiated by the actions of aggrandizers working within generative social contexts. These contexts were feasting contexts which proved an important venue for aggrandizers to use their wealth to form important social alliances and to create and elaborate new social institutions which were to serve the purpose of providing aggrandizers with recognized elevated positions in society.

In these contexts aggrandizers would often spend funds on lavish display and entertainment to further their use of these contexts as a means for social legitimation and advancement. We classically see this in examples from southeast Asia where much money is spent on providing food, drink, and entertainment for those attending the funeral feast, as well as on the deliberate destruction of costly goods, here one of the best examples being the slaughtering of water buffalos.

The same conditions applied to the Greeks of this period. Although they were not killing water buffalos, they were involved in elaborate funeral activity, provisioning for numerous attendees,

putting on funeral games, erecting lavish tomb monuments, and yes, even slaughtering, not buffalo, but prized horses (Kosmetatou 1993).

The nature of the funeral feast was important, in that it was timed so that a large number of people from different communities were able to attend, thereby facilitating the creation of important social ties. For the Greeks I would also add intercommunity festivals, often religious, but with other attributes as well. These ranged from festivals at local sanctuaries where one would find people from a number of communities attending, to the largest of the festivals, those on the athletic circuit, where Greeks from all over the Greek world attended.

The festivals created important contexts for the creation of powerful social ties between people from different communities, but they also created the context for the creation and elaboration of new important community institutions, which were tied to the festivals themselves. Perhaps the most noticeable of these new institutions was that of the gymnasium, which can arguably be traced to the intercommunity athletic festival, as well as to the funeral games which were held at funerals of important individuals.

A good parallel for this movement can be seen in the late Roman Empire, where "ambitious men" as Peter Brown (1993, chapter 2) would characterize them, but we can simply say aggrandizers, were creating new institutions and positions for themselves in the imperial court life of the empire.

An important linkage, which I will return to when I turn to Iron Age Crete, was the tie between funeral contexts, intercommunity athletic contexts, and the context of the battle field. In the early years of the Iron Age there was a strong linkage between the battlefield and the funeral, seen in the number of weapons included in burials and the identification of what we have termed, warrior graves. There was also an important link seen in the ideology of battle competition and that of funeral games which were held on the occasion of the death of an important personage. As the Iron Age progressed this was to change, as the importance of the intercommunity athletic sanctuary rose, the link between the battlefield and the funeral was weakened. Dedications of armor are now found at the sanctuaries and the transfer of funeral games to the athletic games of the sanctuaries also transformed the ideological link between the battlefield and the funeral.

In review, many of the institutions, such as that of the gymnasium, which we see in Greek communities, were the product of aggrandizers creating new social connections and new social roles for themselves within generative contexts, such as that of the funeral and that of the intercommunity sanctuary. The similarity of these institutions from community to community was a product of aggrandizers operating in an intercommunity network, where these new institutions were recognized as important on a Pan-Hellenic level.

The Case for Iron Age Crete

Let us turn our attention now to the communities on Iron Age Crete. Crete was not isolated in the Iron Age. We have evidence for active connections between Crete and the mainland, especially that of the Peloponnesos, and our artifactual record indicates that Iron Age Crete was trading with other communities in the Greek world at that time (Jones 2000). So, why
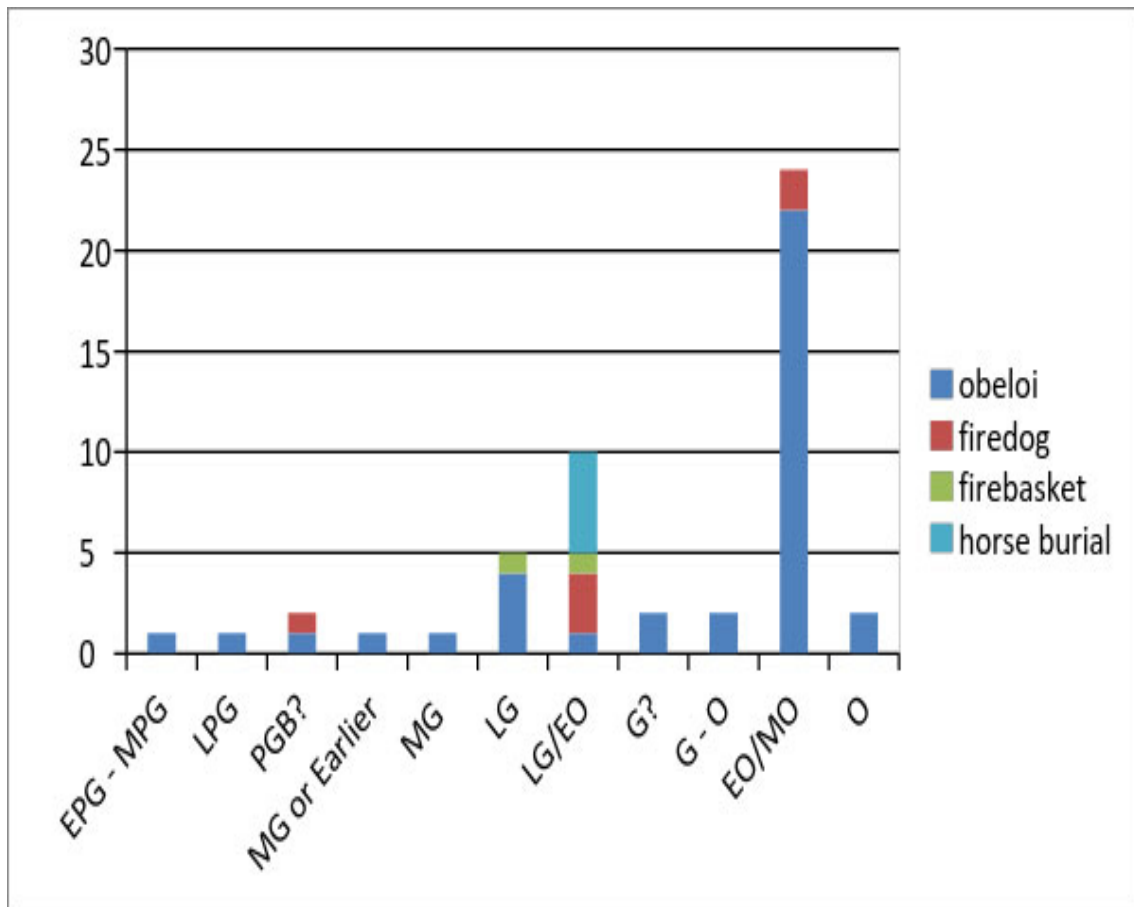
Fig. 2. Evidence for Elaborate Feasting at Knossos, by author.

didn't these institutions find their way into Cretan communities? One answer lies in the internal structure of its communities, a structure which impeded the adoption of Greek institutions seen elsewhere.

My own research in the development of the Cretan polis indicates that Iron Age culture on Crete did undergo a period of stability, chaos, and rapid change. The best evidence comes from a diachronic look at elaboration in the graves from Iron Age Knossos. (Fig. 2) Of the hundreds of burials at Knossos during this period a small number appear to correlate with the behavior of aggrandizers who would be using the funeral context for social advancement. There is also some indication that a small number of people were doing the same thing at Prinias.

But the overall use of feasting contexts on Crete for social elaboration on Crete is more limited than it is elsewhere in ancient Greece. We lack a sufficiently powerful generative funeral context for the creation of new social roles, and we lack an important additional generative context altogether, the intercommunity sanctuary.

When we take a close look at the funeral context, as best we can from Knossos, we note that there does appear to be evidence for the actions of aggrandizers, but it does not at all match the evidence we have from other parts of the Greek world. In other communities the evidence

is much stronger for more active aggrandizer behavior. There are several points here. There is less evidence for elaborate feasting in contemporary funeral contexts on Crete than in funeral contexts in other parts of the Greek world. In general, individuals are much more visible in this context than on Crete. While an overarching feature of burial on Iron Age Crete was collective interment, that in Athens (Knigge 1988, with references), Corinth (Blegen, Palmer, Young 1964), Argos (Courbin 1974; Hagg 1974), and Eretria (Crielaard 2007), for example, was decidedly more individualizing, not only in the individual burials, but in the use of tomb markers as well. That is not to claim that evidence for tomb stones does exist. We do have evidence for their use from sites such as Prinias. But their frequency on Crete does not at all compare with the popularity of such markings outside of Crete. Although full quantification is lacking, initial observations suggest that evidence from Iron Age Crete also shows that there is less connection between the funeral and the battlefield than elsewhere in ancient Greece.

If the funeral context appears to be a limited context for the creation of new social ties and roles on Iron Age Crete, the Cretan situation is even more dire for aggrandizers in that its sanctuaries did not provide the generative context that sanctuaries in the rest of Iron Age Greece did. Cretan sanctuaries are few, and those which existed in the Iron Age do not match those in the rest of the Greek world. Crete lacks the athletic context, where new families could use success in the games to further social advancement at home. A sanctuary, such as Syme in fact, appears overly limited, used primarily for male coming of age ceremonies.

In short, Iron Age Crete lacked the generative social contexts which the rest of Greece enjoyed. A structural analysis shows us that, despite the fact that Cretan communities were in contact with Greek communities in the rest of the world, aggrandizers on Crete were not using similar contexts to create social roles and institutions which matched those which were growing on an intercommunity level in the larger world of the Greeks.

A QUESTION FOR THE FUTURE

This observation produces an important additional question. This question focuses on the character of Cretan elites themselves. The methods of social advancement, which aggrandizers used, in the rest of the Greek world, were correlated closely to the control of advertising and ostentation to engender status for you and your family. On Crete there is little evidence for this. A classic comparison is between the typical Cretan hearth temple and that in the rest of the Greek world. One of the "normal" uses of a religious sanctuary outside of Crete was to advertise individuals and families in attempts to create new or to legitimate newly established statues. This is seen in the numerous dedications made within sanctuaries, often in full view of people who would be gathered around an altar in front of a temple. But for Crete it was different, the altar was located within a small building and there were few, if any dedications which sought to advertise individuals or families. Status on Crete therefore was achieved through exclusion, only a few high status people could be accommodated in the temple, rather than through overt ostentation as seen elsewhere.

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